

Visiting Artist

Leigh Howard Stevens, Marimba

Monday, at 8:00 pm
January 15, 1990

Convocation Hall,
Arts Building
University of Alberta

Program



Department of Music
University of Alberta

About the Artist

LEIGH HOWARD STEVENS is regarded as the world's foremost classic marimbist. Mr. Stevens' repertoire ranges from Renaissance music and the Preludes and Fugues of J. S. Bach, to original marimba works written expressly for him by contemporary composers. Much of this unaccompanied literature was considered technically and musically impossible by one player until the development of Mr. Stevens' new system of four-mallet technique. His "one-handed rolls", his complete mastery of mallet independence, his numerous textural sustaining techniques and his use of birch handled mallets have now become synonymous with contemporary marimba playing, and his revolutionary approach is being adopted by percussionists and marimbists world-wide. His book on the subject of four mallet marimba technique, Method of Movement, has been translated into four languages.

This fresh approach to music making on the marimba has greatly expanded the instrument's compositional possibilities, stimulated composer enthusiasm for the marimba's use in solo and chamber music and ultimately led to a series of over twenty world premiere performances by Mr. Stevens. The first performance of Raymond Helble's Concerto for Marimba and Orchestra by Leigh Howard Stevens and the Denver Symphony was a milestone in the development of marimba literature. His digitally recorded all-Bach album has been greeted with rave reviews for its artistry by magazines as diverse as *Stereophile* and *Billboard*.

Devoted marimba lovers have sprung up all over the world, converted by Leigh Howard Stevens' public solo recitals, hundreds of college campus appearances, performances with symphony orchestras, European concert tours, masterclasses and radio and television appearances both here and abroad. He has been featured in TIME MAGAZINE, on National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*, and Voice of America's internationally broadcast, *New York, New York*. His celebrated musicianship, imaginative programming and exciting visual performances have inspired critical acclaim and standing ovations in forty-seven of the United States and nine foreign countries.

Mr. Stevens is a graduate of the Eastman School of Music where he studied with John Beck and received the prestigious Performer's Certificate. His studies also included coaching under Vida Chenoweth in Auckland, New Zealand and private study with William Dorn, the late xylophone master of Toscanini's NBC Symphony. He is the editor of over twenty works for solo marimba and has been a regular columnist for several percussion magazines. In addition to performing exclusively on an extended-range Musser Marimba of his own design, he also serves as a consultant and conducts educational masterclasses for Musser, a division of The Selmer Company.

Mr. Stevens can be heard on the Musicmasters, Musical Heritage Society and CRI record labels.

**Leigh Howard Stevens, Marimba
Program**

Prelude and Fugue in B flat Major BWV 866
Well Tempered Clavier, Vol. I, No. 21

J. S. Bach
(1685-1750)

Preludes for Marimba, Op. 14
No. 7, Allegro assai
No. 8, Adagissimo e mesto
No. 9, Alla marcia misterioso

Raymond Helble
(b. 1949)

Op. 68, No. 30
Sehr Langsam

Robert Schumann
(1810-1856)

Adventures of Ivan
Ivan Sings
Ivan Can't Go Out Today
Ivan Goes To a Party
Ivan and Natasha
Ivan Is Very Busy

Aram Khachaturian
(1903-1978)

Intermission

Sonata in A minor BWV 1001
(Original: Sonata in G minor for Violin Alone)
Adagio
Fugue
Siciliano
Presto

J.S.Bach

Asturias (Leyenda)

Isaac Albeniz
(1860-1912)

Rhythmic Caprice

L. H. Stevens
(b. 1953)

Use of photographic or sound recording devices in the the hall is prohibited. Mr. Stevens performs on a Musser Marimba of his own design, the M450 LHS.

About The Instrument

The marimba is at once one of the oldest and one of the newest musical instruments. While the first concerto for marimba and orchestra wasn't composed until 1935 (by American Paul Creston), the marimba dates back thousands of years and may actually be the oldest musical instrument known to man.

A seven note lithophone, or "stone marimba" was discovered in Vietnam in 1949 by French pre-historian Georges Condominas. It is estimated to be 5,000 years old, which makes it the oldest known musical instrument specimen in the world. The bars of this marimba-like instrument, which range from 40 to 26 inches in length, were perfectly tuned to a Javanese pentatonic scale by the deliberate chipping and flaking of some ancient instrument maker. Similar instruments have also been found in the burial chambers of Egypt, and in other parts of Africa.

The wooden variety of this family of instruments appears to be indigenous to many primitive cultures in Asia and Africa. The marimba is differentiated from the xylophone-like instruments by the addition of a separate acoustic amplifier for each note. The idea of adding an identically tuned hollowed out gourd or other vessel to amplify and enrich each tone bar of the instrument was a stroke of genius of some unidentified primitive mind.

It appears that the marimba came to Central and South America with slave trade, bypassing Europe until North Americans brought the instrument to the Continent sometime in the second decade of this century. For this reason, the great European master composers were unaware of the marimba. The xylophone had a separate development in Europe, being played by roving Gypsy musicians and eventually making its orchestral music debut in 1874 in Saint-Saëns' *Danse Macabre*.

The evolution of the marimba from a lap-held, crudely tuned instrument of a few notes to today's "Grand Soloist Marimba" came about strictly in the Americas. The change from one diatonic to two chromatic rows of tone-bars, arranged like a piano, was the contribution of Sebastian Hurtado, a Guatemalan, in about 1880. The perfection of the tuning of the bars, the addition of metal tubular resonators for greater volume, and the concept of tunable resonators for weather compensation was all accomplished in North America.

The vibraphone (or "vibes"), the jazzy little cousin of the marimba, is also an American invention (1916), and is distinguished by aluminum-alloy bars and a pedal system designed to dampen the long-ringing bars. The vibraphone is often fitted with an electric fan-like mechanism in the tops of the resonator tubes, which, when activated, gives the instrument a steady vibrato. Other instruments in the keyboard percussion family are the xylophone (essentially a small, high-pitched, brilliantly brittle-toned marimba -- with or without resonators), the glockenspiel or orchestra bells (small steel bars and narrow, very high-pitched range), and chimes or tubular bells (long tubes of special brass alloy, tuned to imitate church bells or carillon).

Milestones in the recent history of the marimba:

1901 The marimba is scheduled for its North American debut in Buffalo at the Pan-American Exposition. Cancelled due to the assassination of President McKinley in that city.

1903 John Calhoun Deagan in Chicago begins to make xylophones and orchestra bells with chromatic keyboards and resonators.

1908 The Hurtado Brothers tour North America with their chromatic marimba with wooden box-resonators.

1910 The J. C. Deagan Company begins manufacturing of marimbas.

1933 Clair Omar Musser conducts 100 marimbas at the Century of Progress Exhibition in Chicago. They perform arrangements of Wagner's *Pilgrims' Chorus*, Chopin, Elgar and Dvorak's *New World Symphony*.

1935 The 100 member International Marimba Symphony Orchestra performs to startled reviews in Europe and at Carnegie Hall in New York City.

1937 Leopold Stokowski toys with idea of adding bass marimba to the string bass section of the orchestra because of its full bass tone. After borrowing one from Clair Omar Musser, wisely decides against it.

1940's Clair Omar Musser breaks away from J. C. Deagan Company over issue of rehiring WWII veterans and founds Musser Marimba Company.

1950's Vida Chenoweth performs first solo marimba recital of all original marimba compositions. Commissions and performs Robert Kurka's *Concerto for Marimba and Orchestra* at Carnegie Hall.

1960's Popularity of marimba increases as college music departments develop percussion programs, marimba ensembles and percussion ensembles.

1970's and 80's Introduction of one-handed rolls and other new techniques spur composer interest in marimba as solo instrument.

Bach on Marimba

In my somewhat prejudiced opinion, the marimba is a superb instrument for the performance of polyphonic Baroque music. Imagine a piano with moveable hammers -- one that allows the performer to adjust where the hammer strikes the string. Imagine further that the performer could change hammer hardnesses and materials at will -- perhaps even control which types of hammers play each voice. Now remove that mechanical contraption that separates the player's hand from the piano's hammers and put the player directly in control by having him actually hold the striking implements. Make one last "minor adjustment" to the piano by substituting rosewood bars and resonating tubes for the strings. Our "improved" piano is, of course, a marimba.

Prelude and Fugue in B flat Major BWV 866, W.T.C. Vol. I, No. 21

The figures in the opening section of the Prelude are so very idiomatic for marimba, it makes one wonder if Bach had a marimba hidden in that large collection of keyboard instruments. . . While I've chosen to use four matched mallets in the Prelude, I use three different mallet types in the three part Fugue. The bass voice is always played by a soft mallet, the soprano is always played with a medium-soft mallet and the middle voice is handed-off between a pair of harder mallets, depending on the distance from the other two voices.

Preludes for Marimba

By 1971 I had developed many new marimba techniques and sounds in the practice room, but there was no marimba repertoire that utilized them. Raymond Helble, a fellow student at the Eastman School of Music, was the first composer I commissioned to remedy that problem. If I remember correctly, the price of the first Prelude was cocktails and dinner. Though inexpensive, Prelude No. 1 was historic. In the very first measure, two new techniques were demanded of the marimbist: a one-handed roll (quick alternation of the two mallets in one hand to sustain one or two notes) and reverse-sticking (e.g., placing the inside right mallet on a higher pitch than the outside mallet in order to play otherwise unreachable chord combinations). A second set of three Preludes was commissioned in the late 1970's and the present set in the mid-1980's. While Helble's tightly structured motivic development and contrapuntal style is quite the antithesis of today's "minimalism", it shares the now-fashionable esthetic of tonality and comprehensibility.

Op. 68, No. 30

It may come as a surprise to pianists who have worked on the famous and fairly frivolous *Happy Farmer* or *Wild Rider*, that this five-minute, bitter-sweet outpouring of emotion is part of the same collection. While many of the less-well-known pieces in Op. 68 seem to be aimed at adult ears and emotions (such as number 30), all 43 of the works bundled under the Op. 68 designation constitute Robert Schumann's *Album for the Young*.

This untitled selection is marked "Sehr langsam" (very slow) in Clara Schumann's edition. Since it is nearly impossible to perform *very* slowly on the piano and still maintain a feeling of sustained legato, most pianists end up performing it at a moderate tempo. The work can truly

blossom on marimba where the various rolling techniques allow the harmonies to clash and evolve at as slow a tempo as the performer wishes. The use of different roll types and speeds help keep the sustained texture interesting and expressive.

Adventurers of Ivan

Many great composers have written miniature works for piano that were intended for young players. While some of these pieces seem to deal with child-like musical ideas and sentiments, others are quite adult in their musical and emotional content. This genre of music is particularly well-suited for the marimba for reasons of texture and range.

Many "adult" keyboard works have thick textures that often contain chords of eight or ten notes sounded simultaneously. When these textures are scaled down for the four or six mallets a marimbist can handle, much of the massiveness of texture is lost. In contrast to this, the albums for the young are written with smaller hands in mind, frequently in a four-voiced texture -- perfect for an exact transcription to marimba.

In their large-scale works, composers frequently use the entire seven-plus octave range of the piano for dramatic effect. When transposed to the marimba's four-and-a-half-octave range, some of the color of the these extremes is lost. Fortunately for players and listeners alike, the albums for the young usually fit perfectly in the marimba's range.

The use of various mallet types adds dramatically contrasting colors, unavailable on the piano, and the addition of sustaining techniques can add a true legato to certain movements. The original Khachaturian collection had eight selections.

Sonata in A minor, BWV 1001

(Original: Sonata in G minor for Solo Violin)

The Fugue and Siciliano take advantage of slightly contrasting tone colors produced by different mallet types, while the Adagio and Presto movements use more consistent mallet tones. In selecting the key of A minor, I have followed the precedent of the viola which traditionally lowers the key five tones to compensate for its range being a fifth lower than that of the violin. At the time I prepared this transcription, the most common North American marimba had a range seven tones lower than the violin, so I lowered the key of this sonata a seventh, into the richer, longer-ringing range of the marimba. (Now that I have an extended range marimba that enables me to perform this sonata down an octave, I will play the work in the original key someday.) Most of the three- and four-note chords written by Bach are impossible to sound and sustain simultaneously on the violin; use of the one-handed roll plus more traditional marimba techniques allow these passages to be heard as notated by Bach. This transcription is a note-for-note, exact transposition of the original, prepared from a copy of Bach's manuscript.

Asturias (Leyenda)

This familiar work of Spanish composer Isaac Albeniz is best known to concert audiences as a piece for guitar. Rather than base my transcription on one of the many available guitar editions, which appear to be based on each other (they share many of the same deliberate changes as well as errors of harmony and rhythm), I went back to the original piano work which appears in *Cantos de España* Op. 232. One of the benefits of consulting this edition can be heard in the middle section. The often repeated tune that opens the section is usually played as single notes or simple octaves on guitar. The original version, however, has the octaves *separated* by two octaves. Restoring this subtle detail gives the melody an eerie, haunting dimension, lost in the popular guitar versions.

Rhythmic Caprice

This piece is my first attempt at composition for the marimba. Three new "col legno" (with wood) effects are used in the work. 1) the birch handle is used on the edge of the bar instead of the mallet head, 2) the mallet head and the handle are used simultaneously (dubbed both a "marimshot" and "Stevens pizzicato" by my students) and, 3) the whole length of both handles are used to produce what I am tentatively calling a "splash/cluster".

The first section of the piece is derived from a simple descending modal figure first heard in the right hand after the short introduction. In the middle section the new melodic interest is in the performer's left hand, while the right hand accompanies with progressively more complicated ticks and splashes. The last section is based on a three-note fragment of the motive from the first section. The very limited melodic and harmonic materials of the piece all evolve rhythmically from simple, to complex, to polyrhythmic, to something as yet nameless.

UPCOMING EVENTS:

Thursday, January 18,
3:30 pm, 2-32 Fine Arts

LECTURE: The Fortepiano in Theory and Practice
Boyd McDonald, Wilfrid Laurier University

Saturday, January 20
8 pm, Convocation Hall

CONCERT: SONOR BOREALIS:
New Music for Northern Ears

Wednesday, January 24
8 pm, Convocation Hall

FACULTY RECITAL: Alan Ord, bass
with Grant Hurst, pianist.

Thursday, January 25
11 am, 2-34 Fine Arts

U of A India Week Lecture Demonstration:
Kathy Hansen, Sitarist, U of BC

Thursday, January 25
3:30 pm, 2-32 Fine Arts

LECTURE: Chopin's Mazurkas: Gems in Miniature
Alexandra Munn, U of A